

MAURITANIA

The 1991 Constitution establishes the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the religion of its citizens and the state. However, a military junta took power in August 2005, overthrew the elected president, dissolved Parliament, suspended parts of the Constitution, and formed a transitional government. On April 19, 2007, the junta and transitional government returned control to a democratically elected president in free and fair elections. The President convened the newly-elected Parliament on April 26, thus returning the country to constitutional order. The transitional and new governments made no significant changes to the Constitution or the previous regime's policies on religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Both the transitional and current governments maintained laws regarding religious freedom and, unlike during prior reporting periods, made no arrests for proselytizing. However, both governments limited freedom of religion by prohibiting the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and the proselytization of Muslims.

There were changes in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

In contrast with the previous reporting period, there were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice during the reporting period; however, a constitutional mandate continued to restrict small non-Muslim populations to meeting in the country's few Roman Catholic or other Christian churches.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 419,212 square miles and a population of 3,270,100. Almost the entire population practices Sunni Islam. There are very small numbers of non-Muslims and Roman Catholic or other Christian churches in Nouakchott, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Although there are no synagogues, a very small number of expatriates practice Judaism.

There were several foreign faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in humanitarian and developmental work in the country. The largest was

World Vision, involved in food and other aid projects. Other faith-based NGOs included World Advocates and Caritas, each providing various services including the provision of medical care, feeding centers, microfinance, and water treatment.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The 1991 Constitution establishes the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the sole religion of its citizens and the state. Both the transitional and current governments, like the previous Taya regime, limited freedom of religion by prohibiting the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and the proselytization of Muslims. A constitutional mandate restricts small non-Muslim populations to meeting in the few Roman Catholic or other Christian churches. Other than these constraints, non-Muslim resident expatriates and a few non-Muslim citizens generally practice their religious beliefs freely.

Both the transitional and current governments and citizenry considered Islam to be the essential cohesive element unifying the country's various ethnic groups. There is a cabinet-level Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education. The High Council of Islam, consisting of six imams, advised the transitional and current governments on the conformance of legislation to Islamic precepts. Although the transitional and current governments provided a small stipend to the imam of the Central Mosque in the capital, mosques and Islamic schools are normally supported by their members and other donors.

The transitional and current governments did not register religious groups; however, secular NGOs, including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the Ministry of the Interior. The transitional and current governments generally did not tax nonprofit organizations, including both religious groups and secular NGOs.

The judiciary consists of a single system of courts that conforms to the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) in matters concerning the family and modern legal principles in all other matters.

The transitional and current governments observed Islamic holy days as national holidays, but this practice did not negatively affect other religious groups.

Both the privately run Islamic schools and the Government's public schools include classes on religion. These classes teach the history and principles of Islam and the classical Arabic of the Qur'an. Although attendance at these religious classes is ostensibly required, many students, the great majority of whom are Muslim, decline to attend them for various ethnolinguistic, religious, and personal reasons. Since these classes determine a disproportionately small percentage of the overall grade, students are able to advance in school and graduate with diplomas, provided they compensate for their failure to attend the religion classes by their performance in other classes.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The implementation of Islamic law has created limited restrictions on religious freedom. Shari'a, proclaimed the law of the land under a previous government in 1983, includes the Qur'anic prohibition against apostasy or conversion to a religion other than Islam; however, this prohibition was never codified in civil law or enforced. The small number of known converts from Islam suffered no social ostracism, and there were no reports of societal or governmental attempts to punish them during the period covered by this report.

Although there is no specific legal prohibition against proselytizing by non-Muslims, in practice the former government prohibited such activity through the use of article 11 of the Press Act, which bans the publication of any material that is against, contradicts, or otherwise threatens Islamic principles. The transitional government effectively suspended article 11 in April 2006 as part of its effort to liberalize the press. However, the article's suspension was not seen as a move to increase religious freedoms, and the transitional and current governments continued to prohibit the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and the proselytization of Muslims. Foreign faith-based NGOs limit their activities to humanitarian and development assistance.

Although Bibles were neither printed nor publicly sold in the country, the possession of Bibles and other non-Islamic religious materials in private homes was not illegal, and these resources were available among the small non-Islamic communities.

Except for the president, the members of the 5-person Constitutional Council, and the 10-person High Council of Magistrates over which the president presides, the Government does not require its employees or members of the ruling political party to take a religious oath. The Constitutional Council and the High Council of

Magistrates advise the president in matters of law and the Constitution. The oath of office includes a promise to God to uphold the law of the land in conformity with Islamic precepts. In April 2006 the transitional government approved certain constitutional amendments that were overwhelmingly approved by voters in a national referendum. One amendment that established a presidential oath of office taken in the name of God was used to swear in the elected president on April 19, 2007.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Unlike in the previous year, there were no instances of persons being detained or questioned in connection with an investigation into proselytizing.

In May 2006 the transitional government arrested six Ghanaian, Guinean, and Nigerian Protestant pastors in Nouakchott, seized their religious materials, and padlocked their unauthorized churches which were run in private houses. Police released the pastors within 24 hours and told them that their churches were illegal and would remain closed. Officials ordered the pastors to cease all future religious meetings, and their churches remained closed at the end of the reporting period. Several weeks earlier, national security forces briefly detained three Christian citizens for allegedly proselytizing.

From March to July 2005, the former (pre-transitional) government detained approximately 80 Islamists, who it claimed were tied to terrorism. In 2005 the former government released 14 prisoners and charged 37 others with membership in unrecognized groups or for inciting violence and making harmful political statements at mosques. The transitional government released 21 of the remaining 66 soon after assuming power, and later in 2005, released an additional 24 for lack of evidence, leaving 21 in prison. Three of these prisoners escaped in April 2006, and officials released eight others with charges still pending. Since that time, the transitional government arrested several other persons it claimed had links to terrorist groups. These arrests appeared to be based on alleged political activities rather than religious beliefs. On June 5, 2007, the Regional Criminal Court of Nouakchott acquitted 24 of the 25 suspects, citing insufficient evidence for conviction. The court sentenced in absentia the remaining suspect to 2 years in prison for falsification of identity papers and illegal possession of a weapon. Thirteen others purportedly linked to a 2005 terrorist attack at Lemghetty remained in prison, and one other was released on bail while standing trial at the end of this reporting period.

In late 2005 transitional government authorities arrested and detained a Western citizen for 48 hours for distributing non-Islamic religious materials to citizens. Several weeks after his release, officials rearrested the individual for possession of non-Islamic religious materials -- despite the fact that possessing these materials is legal -- and expelled him from the country.

The transitional and current governments continued to restrict Protestant groups from meeting in members' homes until they received official recognition.

As in the previous reporting period, both the transitional and current governments restricted the use of mosque loudspeakers exclusively for the call to prayer and Friday service, in accordance with a 2003 law that prohibits the use of mosques for any form of political activity, including the distribution of propaganda and incitement to violence.

The Government has never recognized any non-Islamic groups, including the Catholic Church, which openly operates its facility in Nouakchott.

Shari'a provides the legal principles upon which the country's law and legal procedure are based. The testimony of two women is necessary to equal that of one man. In addition, in awarding an indemnity to the family of a woman who has been killed, the courts grant only half the amount that they would award for a man's death. For commercial and other issues not addressed specifically by Shari'a, the law and courts treat women and men equally.

Beyond the Islamists previously mentioned, there were no additional reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discussed religious freedom issues with the transitional and current governments as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The U.S. Embassy monitored developments affecting religious freedom and maintained contact with imams and the leaders of other religious groups. These contacts included the Minister of Islamic Affairs and Traditional Education.

The U.S. Embassy actively engaged prominent religious leaders in a dialogue to broaden mutual understanding of religious freedom principles and to explain the freedom with which Muslims practice their religion in America.